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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 003420

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SUBJECT: ZARQA ELECTION PRIMER

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Greg Berry, reasons 1.5 (b,d).

¶1. (c) Summary: Mohammed Arsalan, a long-time Embassy contact and candidate for the "Chechen" seat representing Zarqa in the new parliament, spoke with econoff at some length about the election process (Byzantine), his chances (good), and the primary concerns of the Zarqa constituency (surprising). He also shared his views on the sources of strength for the Islamic Action Front/Muslim Brotherhood, and on the factors limiting their political influence. Should Arsalan win his seat, he will be a strong advocate for continued economic reform and openness, and may have some success bringing other MP's into the fold. End summary.

NUMBERS, PREDICTIONS

¶2. (sbu) Mohammed Arsalan is the 45-year old former Secretary General of the Zarqa Chamber of Industry and a long

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time Embassy contact. He is currently a candidate for the "Chechen" seat in Zarqa governorate for the June 17 parliamentary elections. Arsalan recently described to econoff his campaign experiences, as well as the overall mood of Zargans toward the election process and other issues of the day.

¶3. (sbu) The seat Arsalan is contesting is one of 10 in the governorate, and one of four in the district containing the city of Zarqa. Of the other three seats in the district, two are "reserved" for Arab Muslims, and the other is reserved for a Christian candidate. For this election, a total of 37 candidates have registered to contest the 10 seats in the governorate. Of those, four are contesting the Chechen seat, including an IAF candidate, an independent woman, and a "wealthy" male doctor with support in the Palestinian community. The total pool of potential voters in the governorate is around 151,000. Seats for the Zarqa district are allocated to the top two Arab Muslim vote getters, the top Christian candidate (regardless of overall popular vote), and the top Chechen candidate. Thus Arsalan will likely finish somewhere in the top third of the pack of the 37 candidates, but expects to finish first among Chechen candidates.

¶4. (sbu) Arsalan said voter turnout is expected to be low - he estimated no more than 25-30 percent of registered voters would cast votes. Because of his own dogged campaigning, though, he expects to garner some 3,000 votes for himself, which he expects will easily outdistance his nearest competitor. Arsalan predicted that the IAF candidate opposing him would gather no more than 250 votes. For the governorate, Arsalan predicted the IAF would control no more than 3 or 4 seats, with the balance going to independent candidates who will secure votes based on tribal/family affiliations, ethnic/religious ties, or exceptional financial resources used to paper the governorate with campaign posters. He added that few of these candidates were long on substance, and he expected to be able to lead the independents as a bloc of 6-7 MP's.

ANATOMY OF A CAMPAIGN

¶5. (sbu) Arsalan's campaign, like that of almost all independent candidates, is almost completely self-financed. Arsalan said that to run a campaign or create a party, heavy self-financing was critical, since voters had a very poor record of supporting candidates financially. Ironically, Arsalan said he could not even secure an endorsement from his previous employer, the Zarqa Chamber of Industry, due to personal disagreements between himself and the Chairman of the Board. This despite the fact that Arsalan is widely known to support exactly the kinds of policies the Chamber advocates.

¶6. (sbu) Arsalan has instead relied on his contacts in the Chechen community as the main base of his support. In what he termed a real revolution, he convinced the traditionally conservative, anti-liberalization community to back him over more conservative candidates. He credits his ability to win the support of the community to the skills he learned while participating in a series of USAID-funded public speaking and management seminars over the past year. He said this training, and his ability to speak on substantive (read: economic) issues has set him well apart from the rest of the field of candidates.

17. (sbu) Arsalan has maintained a grueling campaign schedule, spending every day speaking with walk-ins to his campaign headquarters and every night (often until 3:00 a.m.) speaking to small groups (10-30) of constituents, both to gauge their interests and to elicit their support. He noted with surprise the large number of students from local universities who have visited him in his offices, an illustration, he says, of a visibly higher level of awareness of issues among the constituency. Arsalan expressed particular joy at speaking with students: "I don't have to walk them through the ABC's of every issue - I can start at K." By contrast, he said his opponents have steered clear of discussions, relying instead on aggressive "paper the town" approaches in an effort to get name recognition on the ballot through the use of campaign posters.

18. (sbu) Arsalan said the IAF initially launched strong attacks against him, accusing him of being a tool of the Americans and a Free Mason (a less inflammatory substitute for "Zionist"), and of selling visas to the U.S. in return for votes. He said they stopped perpetuating these rumors, though, after a few months when they saw the rumors were not gaining any traction among voters. He said the IAF probably also decided to focus its energies on winning the two Arab Muslim seats in the Zarqa city district, and as a result could not sustain negative campaigning against him.

ISSUES AND VIEWS FROM ZARQA'S VOTING PUBLIC

19. (sbu) Arsalan said there was a great deal of voter apathy to overcome in this election. He said that, as a result of perceived voting irregularities in the last parliamentary election, and a long-standing belief that districts were "Gerrymandered" to limit the power of the IAF, voters simply distrusted the system. With little confidence in the system, many voters were reluctant to go to the polls. Arsalan said his message to these voters was that a low turn-out only favors extremism and backwardness, and that a decision to "get out the vote" would help moderates and those who championed growth. He said the approach had resonated somewhat, but he did not expect that he alone would be able to significantly affect turnout.

10. (sbu) He said that most voters (somewhat surprisingly) are hungry for a candidate who can talk about "pocketbook" issues, one who knows something about the economy and can translate pronouncements from the cabinet into programs for Zargans, jobs, and food on the table. He added that many voters are just plain tired of listening to political rhetoric, either on Peace process issues, Iraq, or terrorism. They are equally tired of constant announcements of new programs by the cabinet that don't result in noticeable improvements to their standard of living. Related to this, Arsalan said many voters talk of wanting "equality and justice," i.e. equal opportunities for all Jordanians to benefit from programs, foreign aid, new business, and the like. The inability of the cabinet to deliver has, Arsalan said, hurt prospects for Abul Ragheb and the cabinet to retain their positions after the elections - especially now that new appointments would have to be confirmed by MP's. Arsalan said he has been pounding the accountability in government theme to Zarqa voters, with good response. (Note: other Embassy contacts recently gave Abul Ragheb a 50-50 chance of retaining office after the elections. End note.)

11. (sbu) On Iraq, Arsalan said he is hearing nothing. He said Zargans are bitterly angry at Saddam and, by extension, at Iraq and Iraqis, for being "all talk, no action." He said voters were stunned by the total and rapid collapse of Iraq's armed forces, and that the Iraq debacle further shook their willingness to believe posturing by political leaders, both in the government and in the IAF and local community. On the U.S., he said almost everyone is schizophrenic - of course they agree with the ideals America stands for, but almost everyone is strongly opposed to current American policies in the region and America's treatment of Arabs in the region and in the U.S. He added it was too soon to see any measurable difference in opinion as a result of the Aqaba summit, but acknowledged that the issue of Palestine is closely and continuously watched by Zarqa voters.

PILLARS AND RESTRAINTS ON THE IAF

12. (sbu) Arsalan said the strength of the IAF in general was modest - they probably could count on no more than 10% of votes in Zarqa, and probably similar figures elsewhere in Jordan. The votes they control, though, he said they control completely. The IAF, he continued, draws its strength from two main areas: first, they are exceptionally well organized in a system in which there are no other well organized parties to speak of, only masses of independent candidates. Not only can they mobilize voters, but they can mobilize services and support for communities in which they are prominent. From mosque building to emergency food relief to other charity work (often financed from outside Jordan), the

IAF can deliver to communities in need - thus gaining legitimacy and improving their following. Second, they can claim to speak for God - who, Arsalan pointed out, consistently enjoys good approval ratings. Not only does this give the IAF moral authority in some sectors, it also dismisses them from the burden of developing an issue-based platform. Instead, they simply point to the Koran and tell voters that Islam has the answer - whatever the question.

¶13. (sbu) While these mechanisms make for a tightly-knit organization, Arsalan said the influence of the IAF has been slipping for years, due mainly to their self-imposed exile from political dialogue in Jordan for the past several years. This decision, Arsalan said, probably cost them 30% of their support base, since "now two generations have grown up not knowing about the IAF." Also, in recent months, the IAF was delivered a black eye when it rallied support for Saddam Hussein and Iraq, gleefully repeating Saddam's propaganda, only to find itself standing firmly on the losing side and lacking all credibility. These two trends have left a sour taste in the mouths of many voters who would traditionally have been sympathetic to IAF positions, but now see the IAF in the same light as any other political animal - long on slogans, short on substance.

COMMENT

¶14. (c) Arsalan is a practical, capable, affable, and above all active member of the Zarqa community. He is not afraid to take risks - he is the only liberal running in the governorate, and the only candidate to feature the Jordanian flag in his campaign materials - a nod to the King's "Jordan First" campaign and a slap in the face to Islamists and Palestinian hard-liners alike. Arsalan has long been a supporter of the QIZ's, the FTA, and any other program that can help improve the lives of average Jordanians. He will seek membership in Parliament's economic and foreign relations committees, where he could prove an opinion leader among moderate MP's.

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